**TALL TALES OF THE WEST**

The term “Wild West” refers to a fascinating period in American history when people first moved into the Western states. Miners searched for gold and silver, trapped hunted animals in the Rocky Mountains, and ranchers grazed cattle on the open range. Wagon trains crossed the Great Plains, outlaws held up stagecoaches, and companies built transcontinental railroads linking East and West. Some Indian tribes were moving peacefully onto reservations, while others fought the advance of the white man.

Cowboys became famous after the Civil War during the 1860s, 1870s, and 1880s. Ranchers in Texas, Wyoming, and Montana raised steers which they shipped back East. The cowboys would “roundup” the cattle, brand them, and take the herds to “cow towns” along the railroads. The railroads carried the steers to Chicago and other meatpacking centers. A steer which cost the rancher $5 brought him $40 to $50 when taken to market.

Being a cowboy was a dangerous job. Sometimes “rustlers” would try to steal cattle. On other occasions, the herd would become frightened and stampede.

A cowboy’s life was also lonely. There were few people around, and towns were far apart. To pass the time, cowboys often sang sad songs and told tall tales. The story which follows is an example of a tall tale. It was told more than a hundred years ago. While reading the story, try to decide which parts of it you find hard to believe.

**A Tall Tale**

Dodge City, Kansas, was one of the wildest towns along the cattle trails. One day a cowboy was playing cards with the city’s marshal, Mysterious Mike Jones, when an argument broke out. Mike was no slow man with a six-gun, having put six men on the dead list all in one night. When the gambler drew his gun, Mike drew faster. He not only hit the cowboy but the bullet went right through him and killed a hound dog, who happened to be hanging around the saloon.

Usually after a gunfight, the loser is buried and the whole matter is forgotten. Unfortunately, though, the hound dog happened to belong to man named Jim Kelly. Kelly owned about a hundred dogs which he kept to chase jack rabbits, antelope, and coyotes. To some people, he was known as “dog Kelly,” but not to his face. Kelly was an Irishman with a very bad temper. When he heard Mysterious Mike had killed one of his dogs, he quickly went looking for him with a sawed-off shotgun.

Kelly stormed into the saloon, where the boys tried to cool him down. They explained it was just an accident. But Kelly said Mike had no business shooting his gun without first looking around the saloon to see if any dogs were there. Everyone finally agreed that a full investigation was needed.

Someone sent for O.B. Brown, the coroner to head the investigation. He was nicknamed “Joyful” because he seemed to like his job of pronouncing people dead. A jury was chosen and several witnesses were brought in. They said they had never seen the dog have a drink, and therefore the dog had no business being in the saloon. He should have been out chasing jack rabbits, antelope, and coyotes. Other witnesses said the dog should have had one eye on Mike’s gun because it had a bad habit of going off without warning. The dog could then have jumped out of the way of the bullet by jumping out the window.

The jury brought in its verdict. It was decided that Mysterious Mike was not guilty of murdering Kelly’s dog. The animal should have known better than go to sleep in a Dodge City saloon.

So that Kelly would not be mad, special arrangements were made for burying his dog. A hearse was hired and the famous Dodge City Cowboy Marching Band arrived on the scene. Everyone marched up to Boot Hill, where the animal was laid to rest. All joined in for the singing of a sad cowboy song. After the funeral, Dog Kelly went home with tears in his eyes. Mysterious Mike and the others went back to the saloon. It was time to pick the dead gambler off the floor and bury him.

Directions: Tall tells are made up stories about events which could never really happen. Cowboys used to tell such stories for fun and to pass the time. They also liked to tell tale tales to people from the East who knew little about Western ways. These Eastern “greenhorns” sometimes believed the stories. In the spaces below, give three reasons you would not believe the tall tale you just read.

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Extended Activity:

You are to find a tall tale written and/or told from 1860-1900. Once you find your tall tale, answer the following questions:

1. Author (if known):
2. Date:
3. Brief summary of the tall tale (3-5 sentences):
4. What do you think was the purpose of this tall tale? Why?